11: Murphy E-5 (1952-1953) 1958
SQ13 Mundurucu SQ13

131 of the stream is wild and solitary. The jungle overhangs the water and only once in a great while does a tiny wattle-and-daub house, the home of a collector of wild rubber, appear in a small clearing. At even greater intervals, the launch passes or stops at little hamlets of three to six such houses, which form the trading centers of the scattered collector population.

[439] Several days and barely 400 miles of this travel bring the voyager to the trading posts which conduct sporadic business with one segment of the Mundurucú population. There are a few such establishments, all situated on the Tapajós River near the mouths of its eastern tributaries, the Cadirirí, Cabitutú, and das Tropas. A number of Mundurucú villages are at the headwaters of the latter streams, and an occasional Indian, distinguished by tattooing, unusually ragged or ill-fitting clothing, and impassivity of facial expression can often be seen at the trading [144] posts. Racially, the Mundurucú does not stand out sharply, for Caucasoid genes are as thoroughly distributed among the Indian population as are Indian genes among the local Brazilians.

If one wishes to reach the village of Cabruá, a typical Mundurucú community of the savannah lands east of the Tapajós, it is necessary to ascend the Cabitutú River in a canoe. After five days, or more during the rainy season, of dawn-to-dusk paddling, the port of the village is reached. This consists of a cleared stretch of river bank and a trail that leads to a house about 100 yards away. The house is usually occupied only during the dry season, when some residents of Cabruá go there to pass the summer in fishing and rubber collecting. To reach the village, one must walk a half-day overland from this point. A well-beaten trail leads from the valley of the Cabitutú and over a ridge, dipping down again to cross a small stream. It continues through the forest and then abruptly emerges onto a sun-scorched savannah. The journey is then near an end, and a few miles of slow but steady ascent through the grasslands and past isolated clumps of forest bring one to the village.

361 The majority of the Mundurucú now live on the banks of the larger streams of the area in order to have convenient access to the rubber trees that grow there. Only 300 Indians live in the contemporary savannah villages, but 700 reside on the Cururú River in contact with a Brazilian Indian Service post and a Roman Catholic mission staffed by Franciscan priests. Another 200, the most acculturated part of the population, live among the Brazilian population of the Tapajós River. [173] But the region of mixed savannah and gallery forest east of the Tapajós River is their traditional habitat. Most of the events recounted in their mythology are believed to have occurred there, and this has been their homeland throughout the historic period and, according to Mundurucú tradition, since the creation of man.

178 The modern savannah communities have preserved traditional Mundurucú 621 architecture and village plan to a greater extent than the riverine groups. Each ● 341 has two to five dwelling houses and a men's house, arranged in a circle about a central plaza. But whereas the plazas formerly served as ceremonial and dance precincts and were kept free of weeds, they are now rank with underbush. And the houses are considerably smaller, reflecting the diminished population of the

11: Murphy E-5 (1952-1953) 1958
SQ13 Mundurucu SQ13

tribe in general and the extended family in particular. Also, although the men's houses are still built according to the traditional pattern, the dwellings are now built on a rectangular floor plan in contrast to the older elliptical shape.

Modification of the traditional Mundurucú village is even more striking on the shores of the Cururú River. Some villages number almost 100 inhabitants, but others are tiny hamlets of two small houses; none has the men's house. All dwellings face toward the river, but there is no over-all village plan. The houses are constructed of wattle and daub and, but for a few distinctively Mundurucú characteristics, are much like those of the Neo-Brazilian population. This conformity to the architecture of the whites' is even greater on the Tapajós River, where the Mundurucú live in single-family isolation.

The decline of Mundurucú culture is also evident in the physical appearance and dress of the people. All now wear the cheap cotton shirts and trousers or Mother Hubbard dresses sold to them by the traders. The more traditional men of the savannah villages generally wear penis sheath and bark belt beneath this raiment and usually hunt in the latter accoutrements only. The elaborate body and facial tattooing that were formerly the hallmark of all Mundurucú, both male and female, is also on the wane. It is common now to see young people who are half-tattooed, or who have only the first few lines, never completed because of the lapse of the practice.

History

The current decadence of Mundurucú culture is not unexpected. On the contrary, it is remarkable that the Mundurucú have preserved so much, and that they still have a semiautonomous society after more than a century and a half of continuous peaceful relations with the whites. They arrived late on the Amazon historical scene, and were not noted in published reports until 1768.[3] Whether the Mundurucú reported at that time were the members of a war party or had migrated from their home territory is uncertain, for they were seen far to the north of the upper Tapajós country on the Maué-Assú River, a tributary of a channel of the Madeira River named the Paraná Mirím. But their center of strength remained roughly in their present habitat, and they fought a colonial military detachment in that region in 1795.[4] Their defeat at the hands of government troops ended more than two decades of Mundurucú raids upon the Portuguese settlements of the Amazon and ushered in a period of peaceful relations and active alliance with the whites.

Subsequent to their pacification, large numbers of Mundurucú drifted into the vicinity of the growing towns and missions on the lower Madeira and Tapajós rivers. The missions are of especial interest to the subject matter of this study. In 1803 the mission of Santa Cruz was established on the lower Tapajós River

[1] The term "white" as applied herein to the Neo-Brazilian population of the Amazon is used as a shorthand way of saying, "people bearing a local variant of Luso-Brazilian culture, and who identify themselves with Brazilian society." Actually, the local people represent varying degrees of Caucasoid, Mongoloid, and Negroid admixture.

[3] Monteiro Noronha, 1862.

[4] Almeida Serra, 1869, pp. 4–5.